

Hans Freyer: The Quest for Collective Meaning

By Lucian Tudor

Hans Freyer was an influential German sociologist who lived during the early half of the 20th century and is associated not only with his role in the development of sociology in German academia but also with the “Far Right.” Freyer was part of the intellectual trend known in Germany during the 1920s and 30s as the Conservative Revolution, and had also worked in universities under the Third Reich government for much of its reign, although it should be clear that Freyer was never an “orthodox” National Socialist.[1] However, outside of Germany he has never been very well known, and it may be of some benefit for the Right today to be more aware of his basic philosophy, for the more aware we become of different philosophical approaches to the problems facing modern society the more prepared we are intellectually to challenge the dominant liberal-egalitarian system.

Community and Society

Classical liberal theory was individualist, holding that the individual human being was the ultimate reality, that individuals existed essentially only as individuals; that is, that they are completely independent from each other except when they choose to “rationally” associate with each other or create a “social contract.” While this notion has been increasingly criticized in more recent times from different academic positions, in much of the 19th and 20th centuries liberal theory was very influential.[2] One of the most important thinkers in early German sociology to provide a social theory which rejected individualism was Ferdinand Tönnies, who was a crucial influence on Hans Freyer.

Tönnies’s work established a fundamental distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (“Community”) and *Gesellschaft* (“Society”), a distinction which Freyer and many other German intellectuals would agree with. According to this concept, *Gemeinschaft* consists of the organic relations and a sense of connection and belonging which arise as a result of natural will, while *Gesellschaft* consists of mechanical or instrumental relations which are consciously established and thus the result of rational will. As Tönnies wrote:

The theory of *Gesellschaft* deals with the artificial construction of an aggregate of human beings which superficially resembles the *Gemeinschaft* insofar as the individuals live and dwell together peacefully. However, in *Gemeinschaft* they remain essentially united in spite of all separating factors, whereas in *Gesellschaft* they are essentially separated in spite of all uniting factors.[3]

Tönnies emphasized that in modern urban society the sense of organic solidarity or *Gemeinschaft* was increasingly reduced (with *Gesellschaft* having become the more dominant form of relationship), thus harming human social relations. However, it should also be remembered for the sake of clarity that he also clarified that these were types of relationships that are both always present in any human society; the issue was that they existed in varying degrees. Although sociological theory did not reject the importance of the individual person, it clearly revealed that individuals were never completely disconnected, as classical liberal theory so foolishly held, but

rather that they always have a social relationship that goes beyond them.

Philosophy of Culture

Hans Freyer's definition of culture included not only "high culture" (as is the case with Spengler's work), but as the totality of institutions, beliefs, and customs of a society; that is, the term culture was utilized "in the broadest sense to indicate all the externalized creations of men." [4] More specifically, Freyer identified culture as "objective spirit," a concept derived from Simmel's philosophy. This concept denotes that the creations of human beings – everything which culture comprises, including tools, concepts, institutions, etc. – were created by human minds (the "subjective domain of the psyche") at some point in history in order to fulfill their needs or desires, and following their creation they obtained an "objective value," became "objectified." [5] That is, as a result of being manifested and used over time, concrete cultural creations over time obtained a fixed value independent of the original value given to them by their creator(s) and also of the situation in which they were created. [6]

In Freyer's theory, culture and its traditions are created, first of all, to provide "stability in the face of the natural flux of life," for if culture changed as quickly as Life then cultural forms would be constantly replaced and would therefore lose their value for providing stability. [7] Furthermore, traditions gained value with an increase in their "depth" and "weight" (metaphorical terms used by Freyer), i.e. their permanence among the changes of life and human conditions.

Traditions gained "depth" by being re-appropriated over generations; while cultural objects gained a new meaning for each new generation of a people due to changes in life conditions, the subsequent generation still retained an awareness of the older meanings of these objects, thus giving them "weight." Because of this historical continuity in the re-appropriation of culture, cultural forms or traditions acquire a special meaning-content for the people who bear that culture in the present.

It is also very important to recognize that Freyer asserted that the most crucial purpose of a culture and the social groups associated with it was to "convey a set of delimiting purposes to the individual" in order to provide a sense of "personal meaning," which was "linked to collective stability, collective integration was linked to collective purpose, and collective purpose was linked to the renewal of tradition." [8]

Culture, Race, Volk

Additionally, it should be noted that another significant aspect of Freyer's philosophy is that he held that "the only viable cultural unity in the modern world was the Volk," [9] which means that although culture exists on multiple levels, the only entity which is a reliable source of cultural identity and which carries relatable traditions is the Volk (a term which is oftentimes translated as "nation" or "people" but is in this sense better rendered as "ethnicity"). The Volk was the collective entity from which particular cultures emerged, which bore the imprint of a particular Volksgeist (technically, "folk spirit") or collective spirit.

The Volk as an entity was created by an interaction between two forces which Freyer termed Blut ("Blood") and Heimat ("Home"). Home is the landscape or environment in which the Volk formed, "that place from which we come and which we cannot abandon without becoming sick,"

while “Blood is that which comprises our essence, and from which we cannot separate ourselves without degenerating,”[10] meaning the racial constitution of the people whose biological integrity must be upheld. While in order to be healthy, a Volk must have the characteristic of Bodenständigkeit (“groundedness in the soil,” as opposed to the “groundlessness” of liberal society), a key foundation of the Volkstum (“Folkdom”) is race:

It is here [at the Volkstum] that all the talk of race originates and has its truth. When one objects that this is pure biology, that after all spiritual matters cannot be derived from their natural basis, or when one objects that there are no pure races – these objections fail to grasp the concept of race that is a component of the new worldview. Race is understood not in the sense of “mere” biology but rather as the organic involvement of contemporary man in the concrete reality of his Volk, which reaches back through millennia but which is present in its millennial depth; which has deposited itself in man’s bodily and psychic existence, and which confers an intrinsic norm upon all the expressions of a culture, even the highest, most individual creations.[11]

The Loss of Meaning and Particularity

Hans Freyer was, like G. W. F. Hegel and Wilhelm Dilthey (two of his major influences), a historicist, although unlike Hegel he did not believe that history was entirely rational or that positive “progress” would be necessarily determined in history.[12] As a historicist, Freyer believed that all human cultures and values are created by historical circumstances and thus change over time, and also therefore that no Volk or culture is, objectively speaking, superior or inferior to another, and that essentially each culture and tradition is just as valid as any other. That is, “history thinks in plurals, and its teaching is that there is more than one solution for the human equation.”[13]

As result, the question of which cultural tradition would form the basis of collective meaning came into question. Freyer, in the German historicist line of thought, rejected the notion that one could scientifically or rationally choose which culture is better (due to the fact that they are all equally legitimate), and furthermore people in modern times held an awareness of the existence of the multiplicity of human cultures and their historical foundations. This awareness caused many modern people to feel an uncertainty about the full validity of their own culture, something which served as a factor in the loss of a sense of meaning in their own traditions and therefore a loss of a sense of personal meaning in their culture. That is, a loss of that sense of guidance and value in one’s own traditions which was more common in ancient and Medieval societies, where human beings tended to recognize only their own culture as valid. Freyer noted: “We have a bad conscience in regard to our age. We feel ourselves to be unconfirmed, lacking in meaning, unfulfilled, not even obligated.”[14]

However, there was also another source of the lack of a sense of collective meaning in modern societies: the development of industrial society and capitalism. The market economy, without any significant limits placed upon it, along with the emergence of advanced technology, had a universalist thrust, not recognizing national boundaries or cultural barriers. These inherently universalist tendencies in capitalism created another factor in the loss of a sense of cultural uniqueness, collective meaning, and particularity in human beings in the West.

The modern economy was the source of the formation of “secondary systems,” meaning

structures which had no connection to any organic ethnic culture and which regarded both the natural world and human beings in a technical manner: as objects to be used as resources or tools to be utilized to increase production and therefore also profit. Because of this, the systems of production, consumption, and administration expanded, resulting in a structure controlled by a complex bureaucracy and in which, “instead of membership in a single community of collective purpose, the individual was associated with others who occupied a similar role in one of the secondary systems. But these associations were partial, shifting, and ‘one-dimensional,’ lacking deeper purpose of commitment... [leaving] the individual lonely and insecure.”[15]

Freyer asserted that history is divisible into three stages of development: Glaube (“Faith”), Stil (“Style”), and Staat (“State”). In the stage known as Glaube, which corresponded to the concept of ancient Gemeinschaft, human beings were “completely surrounded, encircled, and bound up in a culture that ties [them] closely to other members of [their] society.”[16] In the stage known as Stil, society would become hierarchical as a result of the domination of one group over another. While ancestry and a belief in the natural superiority of the ruling class would be valued in the resulting system, in later stages the source of social status would become wealth as a result of the rise of economic motives and capitalistic class society would form. As a result, the loss of meaning previously described occurs and history enters “critical epochs in which the objective cultural forms were unable to contain the flux of life.”[17] This would give rise to the necessity of a revolutionary transformation of the cultural reality: the third impending stage, Staat.

Revolution from the Right

Hans Freyer studied the problem of the failure of radical Leftist socialist movements to overcome bourgeois society in the West, most notably in his *Revolution von Rechts* (“Revolution from the Right”). He observed that because of compromises on the part of capitalist governments, which introduced welfare policies to appease the workers, many revolutionary socialists had come to merely accommodate the system; that is, they no longer aimed to overcome it by revolution because it provided more or less satisfactory welfare policies. Furthermore, these same policies were basically defusing revolutionary charges among the workers.

Freyer concluded that capitalist bourgeois society could only be overcome by a revolution from the Right, by Right-wing socialists whose guiding purpose would not be class warfare but the restoration of collective meaning in a strong Völkisch (“Folkish” or “ethnic”) state. “A new front is forming on the battlefields of bourgeois society – the revolution from the Right. With that magnetic power inherent in the battle cry of the future even before it has been sounded...”[18] This revolutionary movement would be guided by a utopian vision, yet for Freyer the significance of belief in utopia was not the practicality of fully establishing its vision, “utopia was not a blueprint of the future but the will to actively transform the present... Utopias served to transmute critical epochs into positive ones.”[19]

The primary purpose of the new State which Freyer envisioned was to integrate human beings belonging to the Volk into “a closed totality based upon the reassertion of collective particularity.”[20] Freyer asserted that the only way to restore this sense of collective particularity and a sense of community was to create a closed society in which the state ensures that foreign cultural and ideological influences do not interfere with that of the Volk, for such interferences would harm the unity of the people. As Freyer wrote, “this self-created world

should completely, utterly, and objectively enclose a particular group; should so surround it that no alien influences can penetrate its realm.”[21] Freyer’s program also carried with it a complete rejection of all multiculturalism, for the state must be composed solely of one ethnic entity in order to have cultural stability and order.

The state which Freyer anticipated would also not do away with the technological achievements of capitalism but rather make use of them while bringing the economic system under its strict control (essentially “state socialism”), eliminating the existence of the economy as a “secondary system” and reintegrating it into the organic life of the Volk. This Völkisch state also served the necessary purpose of unifying the Volk under a single political force and guidance, for, along with Machiavelli and Carl Schmitt, Freyer believed it was essential that a people is capable and ready to defend itself against the ambitions of other states. For the sake of this unity, Freyer also rejected democracy due to the fact that he believed it inherently harmed the unity of the Volk as a result of the fact that it gave rise to a multiplicity of value systems and interest groups which competed for power; the state must be politically homogeneous. “The state is... the awakening of the Volk out of timeless existence [Dasein] to power over itself and to power in time.”[22]

Freyer also believed in both the inevitability and the importance of conflict in human existence: “War is the father of all things . . . if not in the literal sense then certainly for the thing of all things, the work of all works, that structure in which the creativity of Geist [“Spirit”] reaches its earthly goal, for the hardest, most objective and all-encompassing thing that can ever be created – for the state.”[23] The act of war or the preparation for war also served to integrate the people towards a single purpose, to give meaning to the individual by his duty to a higher power, the State. War was not something to be avoided, for, in Freyer’s philosophy, it had the positive result of intensifying the sense of community and political consciousness, as Freyer himself experienced during his time as a soldier in World War I.[24] Thus, “the state as a state is constituted by war and is continuously reconstituted by the preparation for war.”[25] Of course, this did not imply that the state had to constantly engage in war but rather in the preparation for war; war should be waged when diplomacy and strategy fails to meet the state’s demands.

Freyer’s Later Transformation

Hans Freyer believed, before its rise to power, that Hitler’s National Socialist movement constituted the force which would create the state of which he had written and hoped for. However, by the late 1930s he was disappointed by the repressive and basically “totalitarian” nature of the regime, and after World War II began to advocate a drastically different approach to the problems of modern society. He essentially became a moderate and partially liberal conservative (as opposed to being a “radical conservative,” which is a descriptor for his pre-war views), a change which was probably a result of his disappointment with the Third Reich coupled with the Reich’s downfall and the ensuing political changes thereafter.

Freyer concluded that the state was itself a “secondary system” (like those created by the market economy) and if used to organize the re-appropriation of tradition it would negatively distort cultural life. His new line of thought led him to the conclusion that the state should be limited (hence his subsequent support for democracy) and that welfare-state capitalism should be practiced because “it was less likely to create the degree of concentration of power characteristic of a socialist economy.”[26] Freyer still advocated the necessity of creating a sense of value in one’s own particular culture and traditions and a sense of collective meaning, but he believed

that this should be done in the private sphere of life and through “private” institutions such as the family, the church, and local communities. Likewise, he no longer advocated a complete closure of society and he also recognized that the existence of a plurality of groups in the state was unavoidable.

We may conclude by pointing out that this transformation in Freyer’s position, while undoubtedly partly influenced by the existence of a new political regime, was also certainly not unjustified, for there is much to criticize in his earlier work. For example, it is certainly not unreasonable to question whether an authoritarian regime, a constant engagement or preparation for warfare, and a society completely closed to other societies are necessary to restore a sense of community and a value in one’s own culture and ethnicity.[27] On the other hand, one does not necessarily have to agree with all of Freyer’s later conclusions, for one could argue they are also not without imperfections. However, ultimately we gain from a view of his thought and its transformation with a wider, more informed philosophical perspective.

The Relevance of Freyer’s Thought Today

There is much in Freyer’s philosophy which is relevant to the current problems our world is facing (although we make no implication that his ideas are entirely unique to him), in some cases even more relevant today than in the time they were written. While his earlier notion of a complete cultural closure of society may be too extreme, in the face of the complete opening of society experienced in the later 20th Century and early 21st Century, it is quite clear that a partial level of closure, that is some (although not absolute) barriers, are necessary to return to a healthy cultural reality.[28] Likewise, his recognition of the importance of race in the cultural and social realm, going beyond the simplistic notion of race as being merely one’s genetic makeup, is pertinent today as far too many people do not even consciously understand the full role of race in culture and society.

Moreover, in light of the fact that the majority of former radical Leftists in most Western and also some Eastern nations have shifted towards the “Center” and have become merely defenders of the political status quo, Freyer’s commentaries on the compromises made by socialists in his time correspond with the present day situation as well. One may also argue that Freyer’s recognition of the importance of a “utopian” vision to guide political movements is necessary to change societies, for without a dream for a better world to motivate people it is not likely that the status quo could be overcome.

Finally, considering the exacerbated “individualism” (which, we must stress, is not merely recognizing the value of the individual, which is perfectly normal, but rather something extreme and anomalous) common in modern Western societies, Freyer’s stress on “collective meaning,” the most crucial concept at the center of his philosophy, is probably of the greatest importance. For today it is indeed the obsession with the individual, and the placing of the individual over ethnicity and culture, which is undoubtedly one of the most significant roots of the ethnic, cultural, and racial downfall of Europe and European-derived nations. Thus, our own quest corresponds to Freyer’s, for like him we must aim to re-establish collective meaning in order to salvage our ethnic and cultural integrity.

Notes

[1] For more in-depth information on Hans Freyer's life, see Jerry Z. Muller, *The Other God That Failed: Hans Freyer and the Deradicalization of German Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988). We should note here to our readers that Muller's book, despite its liberal bias, constitutes the single most important and extensive work on Freyer in the English language thus far.

[2] For an explanation of classical liberal theory concerning the individual as well as a critique of it, see Michael O'Meara, *New Culture, New Right: Anti-Liberalism in Postmodern Europe*. (Bloomington, Ind.: 1stBooks, 2004), pp. 57 ff. On the forms of liberalism through history, see also Paul Gottfried, *After Liberalism: Mass Democracy in the Managerial State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[3] Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Society* (London and New York: Courier Dover Publications, 2002), pp. 64–65.

[4] Muller, *The Other God That Failed*, p. 93.

[5] Hans Freyer, *Theory of Objective Mind: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Culture* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999), p. 79. This is the only book by Freyer to be translated into English.

[6] Note that this entire general theory was expounded by Freyer in *Theory of Objective Mind*.

[7] Muller, *The Other God That Failed*, p. 94. Note that this notion is comparable to the theory of culture and the nature of human beings provided by Arnold Gehlen, who was one of Freyer's students. See Arnold Gehlen's *Man: His Nature and Place in the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) and also his *Man in the Age of Technology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

[8] Muller, *The Other God That Failed*, pp. 93 and 96.

[9] Colin Loader and David Kettler, *Karl Mannheim's Sociology as Political Education* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2002), p. 123.

[10] Hans Freyer, *Der Staat* (Leipzig, 1925), p. 151. Quoted in Muller, *The Other God That Failed*, p. 99.

[11] Hans Freyer, "Tradition und Revolution im Weltbild," *Europäische Revue* 10 (1934) pp. 74–75. Quoted in Muller, *The Other God That Failed*, p. 263.

[12] On Freyer's concept of progress as well as some of his thoughts on economics, see Volker Kruse, *Methodology of the Social Sciences, Ethics, and Economics in the Newer Historical School: From Max Weber and Rickert to Sombart and Rothacker* (Hannover: Springer, 1997), pp. 196 ff.

[13] Hans Freyer, *Prometheus: Ideen zur Philosophie der Kultur* (Jena, 1923), p. 78. Quoted in Muller, *The Other God That Failed*, p. 96.

[14] Freyer, *Prometheus*, p. 107. Quoted in Muller, *The Other God That Failed*, pp. 100–101.

- [15] Muller, *The Other God That Failed*, p. 345.
- [16] *Ibid.*, p. 101.
- [17] Loader and Kettler, *Mannheim's Sociology*, p. 131.
- [18] Hans Freyer, "Revolution from the Right," in: *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, edited by Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), p. 347.
- [19] Loader and Kettler, *Mannheim's Sociology*, pp. 131–32.
- [20] Muller, *The Other God That Failed*, p. 106.
- [21] Freyer, *Der Staat*, p. 99. Quoted in Muller, *The Other God That Failed*, p. 110.
- [22] Hans Freyer, *Revolution von Rechts* (Jena: Eugen Diederich, 1931), p. 37. Quoted in Loader and Kettler, *Mannheim's Sociology*, p. 126.
- [23] Freyer, *Der Staat*, p. 143. Quoted in Muller, *The Other God That Failed*, p. 113.
- [24] See Muller, *The Other God That Failed*, p. 64.
- [25] Freyer, *Der Staat*, p. 143. Quoted in Muller, *The Other God That Failed*, p. 113.
- [26] Muller, *The Other God That Failed*, p. 348.
- [27] On a "right-wing" perspective in contradistinction with Freyer's earlier positions on the issue of democracy and social closure, see as noteworthy examples Alain de Benoist, *The Problem of Democracy* (London: Arktos, 2011) and Pierre Krebs, *Fighting for the Essence* (London: Arktos, 2012).
- [28] On the concept of a balance between total closure and total openness, see also Alain de Benoist, "What is Racism?" *Telos*, Vol. 1999, No. 114 (Winter 1999), pp. 11–48. Available online here: http://www.alaindebenoist.com/pdf/what_is_racism.pdf.

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